

Centre for Qualitative Research

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SESSION SIX

Evaluating qualitative research

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Session Summary

Building on the topics covered so far, this session explored a complex question of how quality in qualitative research is judged, and by whom, in practice.

The session centred around two broad constructs that are taken into consideration when evaluating the quality of any type of research. Namely: the validity of knowledge and the robustness of the research process through which knowledge is created. By juxtaposing the goals and assumptions of positivist research (grounded in the tradition of natural sciences and 'scientific method') with non-positivist, interpretative social enquiry (grounded in constructivism, phenomenology, anthropology, ethnography etc), we discussed how and why the understanding of what constitutes valid knowledge and robust research process varies between different research traditions and sciences. For that reason, it is important that qualitative researchers are, themselves, aware of the relevant criteria against which their studies are evaluated and that they write and present their research in a way which clearly and persuasively reflects those criteria.

In broad terms, qualitative research is defined by the goals and assumptions of social enquiry: it focusses on people as a phenomenon, whereby researchers gather data from people in verbal, written and/or visual forms, to create context-specific knowledge or understanding using an interpretative method, inevitably informed by theory and philosophy.

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Therefore, the criteria conventionally used to demonstrate quality in positivist research (objective truth, generalisability, reliability, and replicability of the research process and results) cannot be applied in the same way in qualitative studies.

The procedures for ensuring validity, credibility and robustness of qualitative research process and results are more demanding and require demonstrating:

- consistency, coherence and transparency (audibility) of all elements of the research process, i.e. how it all fits together: your onto-epistemological stance; your research questions; your theoretical grounding, methodological choices and the resulting claim to new knowledge;
- richness of both your data (empirical material) and your narrative to ensure that links between claims, evidence and theory are thorough, and are richly discussed;
- persuasive evidence of relevance and purpose of the enquiry (why is it important, useful and significant and for whom?)

We suggested a diagram (please, see the attached ppt) illustrating the key elements of the research process as a useful and practical reference point for qualitative researchers when thinking about, reflecting on, and evaluating their research.

We also drew to your attention some typical mistakes qualitative researcher should avoid.

We then briefly explained the importance of understanding evaluation criteria used by journals accepting qualitative research, with a view of continuing to explore this topic in the final session (Session 7).

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Summary

- Ensuring and evaluating quality of qualitative research is a complex task
- All elements of the research process need to fit together in a coherent and consistent manner
- Rich, theoretically informed narrative is required in order to ensure transparency of:
 - onto-epistemological commitments
 - how and why important choices related to the research purpose / aim and methodology were made
 - the relationship between the evidence and respective claims and theories.

Reading List

Seale C., Gobo G., Gubrium J. and Silverman D. (2007) Qualitative Research Practice Sage: London

Seale C (2011): The Quality of Qualitative Research

<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/the-quality-of-qualitative-research/n4.xml>

Animation

<https://biteable.com/watch/3052260/666ea5593004fbee-bb45a2c7b5600fae>

